

Hearts of our towns ripped out in vicious mallings

Richard Glover October 8, 2011

During the school holidays, you might have had a chance to visit one of our charming Australian country towns. While you were there, you might also have noticed how it's being completely ruined. Mittagong is an example.

For years it was a highway town, splayed out along the Hume, the trucks constantly rumbling through. Taking a walk along the highway was like scuba-diving in an ashtray.

Then the highway moved and Mittagong was transformed. A cafe or two sprang up in the main street. You could cross the road without risking instant death. Suddenly, it felt like a perfect, bustling little town.

Naturally, this state of affairs could not last.

Some genius permitted the construction of a huge shopping mall on the edge of town. Every time I drive past, the mall is a bit bigger and busier and the main street a little deader. It's like a tumour sucking the life from the town. Other businesses are now opening in the shadow of the mall, forced to accept that the centre of Mittagong has been unilaterally shifted.

Mittagong itself has been mauled, or more accurately: malled. It's like one of those ancient villages in Italy, prosperous and successful until it was suddenly abandoned in the 16th century due to plague, invasion or flooding. The tour guide will explain that "they were forced to move the whole town further down the valley".

In Mittagong, there wasn't a plague or a foreign invasion or flooding. It's just easier to build a giant mall on the sort of flat field you find on the edge of town. So it sits there, a giant glittering turd out in the middle of nowhere, just far enough away that people are pretty much forced to drive.

The planners, I'm sure, claimed the new project would bring extra choice and competition, which sounds good until you realise the old supermarket in town closed its doors once the new centre opened. So, there's still one Woolworths; it's just further away.

The main competition that's been brought to town is between shops serving rubbish food. For the first time, Mittagong locals have been afforded every Australian's birthright - easy access to Michel's Patisserie, Gloria Jean's, Donut King and a KFC.

In the US, this process is further advanced. Most towns have a dead, abandoned centre with malls on the outskirts, flags aflutter like mediaeval battlements.

To have a proper town centre is now so rare it's advertised as part of the tourist pitch: "Visit historic Collegetown. Browse the shops in the centre of the town. You can even shop on foot." Wow. What a concept.

In these rare surviving towns, the tourist pamphlets breathlessly point out the existence of "locally owned businesses". In Oxford, Mississippi, a locally owned bookstore and a locally owned department store are listed among the town's chief attractions, quaint survivors of a bygone era like a wheelwright's workshop or a blacksmith's forge.

You might want to take a picture of the owner-operator at work, just to marvel at the continuing existence of a small retailer.

When retailing moves from the centre to the outskirts, local businesses seem unable to follow. Old Mittagong is still a series of individual businesses - cafes, a pet store, a fish-and-chip shop. The new mall is nearly all chain stores: Prouds the Jewellers, Strandbags, Payless Shoes, Baker's Delight and Noni B.

I don't quite understand why this is so. Maybe the rents in the mall are so high you need a chain-store approach with screwed-down costs and high prices to survive. Maybe the owners of the mall prefer dealing with the chains. I don't understand the reasons but the effects are obvious. Every mall in every town has the same shops.

As the British writer Mark Steel has pointed out, the Marxist left was always attacked for wanting to make the whole world look the same - the internationalist worker's paradise. Actually, it's capitalism that's turned every town into a mirror image of the next.

In Britain, one survey categorised 42 per cent of towns as "clone towns", dominated by the chains. The champion was Exeter, in which 59 out of 60 shops were chain stores. God knows how that one store survived.

Maybe they miscounted the cathedral as locally run.

Of course, say supporters of the mall, it's all about choice. No one says you have to shop there. No one's forcing you into Donut King. That's all true; but good town planning is about building communities that retain their local character; that encourage people to walk rather than drive; that provide a good range of services, not just 10 different ways to buy empty calories.

Mittagong is a spectacularly pretty and well-situated town; I'm sure it will survive being malled. No one can take away that cradle of hills, the lake on the edge of town, the park on the main street.

But when - as in the US and Britain - nearly all of our towns have been sucked dry and replaced by clones, you wonder if we'll realise what's been lost.

At least we'll have ready access to fast food.

Maybe KFC needs a new slogan: "We had to destroy the town in order to serve it."

This story was found at:

<http://www.smh.com.au/opinion/society-and-culture/hearts-of-our-towns-ripped-out-in-vicious-mallings-20111006-1la5b.html>